

BOOKS

Murder Will Out

THE MASARYK CASE by Claire Sterling. 366 pages. Harper & Row. \$7.95.

Views of the cold war are still being busily revised. Much that was once taken on this side of the Iron Curtain as a clear-cut matter of Soviet aggression is now being questioned. Among many events that revisionism is unlikely to explain away, however, is the murder of Jan Masaryk in Prague on March 10, 1948.

Or so Claire Sterling concludes in a new study of the case. The Czechoslovakian Foreign Minister, she says, was murdered—exactly as cold war history had it—by the Communists, under Soviet direction, two weeks after the party had taken power in Czechoslovakia. The guilty party was quick to declare Masaryk a suicide. Even in 1948, hardly anybody in Prague believed the story. Four weeks ago, after more than 20 years, the Czech Communists closed an investigation they themselves had opened under the liberal Dubček regime. Despite the new presence of the Russian army, they withdrew the suicide verdict. But in a grotesque compromise (TIME, Dec. 19, 1969), they decided that Masaryk's fall from his bathroom window was an accident.

Detective Story. The circumstances were obscene. At sunrise on March 10, Masaryk's body was found in the courtyard of the Cernin Palace. He was in pajamas, barefoot. He lay on his back a yard from the open bathroom window 30 feet above. He seemed to have landed on his feet, for both legs were broken at the ankles, the heels shattered, the stumps protruding and bits of bone strewn over the cobbles. His hands were scuffed, and the fingernails had paint or plaster beneath them.

Within minutes of the "discovery" of Masaryk's body, the case and his apartment were sealed off by the Communist-run security police, led by Interior Minister Václav Nosek. Within months, at least 25 people who knew something, or were believed to know something, were locked up. Of these, 14 were executed, murdered, committed suicide or, as the phrase went, "died in prison."

By sifting every scrap of evidence and interviewing virtually everyone still alive who could have knowledge of the death, the author has reconstructed certain essentials. There was extreme disorder in both Masaryk's bedroom and bathroom—pillows on the bathroom floor and in the dry tub, glass bottles from the medicine chest ground under foot, a smear of excrement on the sill. Strangely, Masaryk had gone out the bathroom window even though it was much smaller than the one in the bedroom and very awkward.

Claire Sterling, a veteran foreign correspondent now on the staff of Harper's Magazine, relies heavily on such

physical facts, construed more logically, to prove murder. On authority from forensic medicine, she makes the point that men on the point of suicide do not lose control of their bowels. Such loss of control is a symptom of the last stages of suffocation. As the author visualizes it, the struggle between the 200-lb. Czech statesman and his assailants began in the bedroom and progressed to the bathroom. There they finally managed to hold him down in the tub and stifle him with pillows. When he was unconscious or nearly so, he was shoved out the nearest window, feet first.

In some ways, the method of Masaryk's murder is the least of the mys-



JAN MASARYK

Into a world gone soft on myths.

teries surrounding the case. Presumably Masaryk was murdered because he was the only remaining political figure who might stir popular resistance against the party, and so draw in Western support. But who ordered the murder? Were the murderers themselves killed? When a new investigation began during the brief freedom permitted by the Dubček government in 1968, why did the new investigating prosecutor distort the evidence—as he did, among other ways, by downplaying the disorder in Masaryk's apartment? Claire Sterling answers these attendant mysteries of 1948 by relating her long train of sleuthing. Though repetitive, and at times infuriatingly complex (there are 112 characters involved), the result is a sporadically enthralling detective story. It is something more: a fascinating palimpsest of history. Author Sterling evokes the intricate maneuverings sur-

rounding the 1948 putsch and describes the earlier tragic betrayal that led to Hitler's 1938 march into the Sudetenland. She outlines the Russian troop movements that took place in 1948 and shows how in 1968 Soviet agents poured into Czechoslovakia in much the same fashion. It is indeed melancholy to be reminded that men like Ludvík Svoboda and Josef Smrkovský, valiant champions of liberal democracy in 1968, were deeply implicated in the 1948 putsch—Svoboda as a pliant Defense Minister who kept the troops in their barracks, Smrkovský as the man who armed and led the Communist Workers' Militia into the streets.

Deeper Mystery. Beyond the bloody murder and the political history lies a deeper mystery: Jan Masaryk himself. His fiancée-mistress, Marcia Davenport, who left Prague two days before his death, has written that he did not kill himself,* and would not "intentionally have gone out the window." As the son of the austere Tomáš Masaryk, founder of the nation after World War I, Jan Masaryk was revered by the Czechoslovak people. He was also loved by them for his charm and his proven loyalty. But much that he did, or failed to do, remains unclear. Why, for instance, as the personification of Czechoslovak democracy, did he remain in the Czech government after the 1948 Communist takeover? Was he in touch with Western agents? Was he planning to flee?

In the absence of hard evidence, insight into such questions might come from inner knowledge of Masaryk's character. Claire Sterling devotes a chapter to martyred Religious Hero Jan Hus and to Jaroslav Hašek's rumpled antihero Good Soldier Schweik as they relate to the Czechoslovak national character and to Masaryk's own. Masaryk remains curiously elusive, a betwixt and between figure. If he had been a passionately unrelenting zealot like Hus (a figure hardly characteristic of his country in modern times), the history of Czechoslovakia after the war might have been different. He loved Schweik, with his comic, little-man's passive resistance to "patriotism, militarism, idealism, totalitarianism, causes of whatever kind, and all plots, schemes, blandishments and exhortations." On the record, Masaryk, in dealing with the Communists, tried to follow several Schweikian rules:

Never offer open resistance to an irresistible force.

Always offer to cooperate.

Never actually do so, despite your most valiant efforts.

In the end, though, Masaryk bore too much responsibility and was too aristocratic to play the lowly Schweik for long. Though it was not his fault, he failed tragically to live up to Schweik's cardinal rule: "Always try to outlive the enemy; dying will get you nowhere."

He had a very great fear of pain. He had quantities of sedatives and sleeping drugs sufficient to commit suicide."